DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 943 UD 026 171

AUTHOR Timm, Joan S.
TITLE Cultural Bias in Children's Storybooks: Implications for Education.
PUB DATE 30 Mar 88
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 5-9, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Discrimination; *Childrens Literature; Cultural Differences; Elementary Education; Instructional Materials; *Racial Bias; *Sex Bias; *Stereotypes; *Textbook Bias; Tokenism

ABSTRACT

This study addresses concern about bias in educational materials for elementary school pupils. Children's storybooks were examined for the appearance of biases across the cultural categories of race, ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic level, religion, and environmental background. These biases included stereotyping, invisibility (omission of certain groups), imbalance, linguistic form, unreality, and fragmentation. A total of 727 cases of bias were found in 167 storybooks, with distinct variations in frequencies across both bias categories and cultural groups. Stereotyping and invisibility were most prevalent among bias categories. Gender, race, and ethnic discrimination were the most prevalent types. When the results of the study are considered as a whole, the educational lesson is that members of different cultural groups have limited opportunities and that they are not viewed as being equally valued by the society. In order to teach more constructing all forms of bias should be taken into account when teachers select reading materials for their pupils. (Author/VM)

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Cultural Bias in Children's Storybooks: Implications for Education

Joan S. Timm

Department of Educational Foundations

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

Running head: STORYBOOK BIAS

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Abstract

Children's storybooks were examined for the appearance of several biases across the cultural categories of race/ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic level, religion and environmental background. These biases included stereotyping, invisibility, imbalance, linguistic form, unreality, and fragmentation. A total of 727 cases of bias were found in the storybooks, with distinct variations in frequencies acrosss both bias categories and cultural groups. Stereotyping and invisibility were most prevalent among bias categories. Gender and race/ethnicity were the cultural groups most often discriminated against. All biases found in this study have implications for education.

Cultural Bias In Children's Storybooks: Implications for Education

Stereotyping, invisibility, imbalance, linguistic form, unreality, and fragmentation are types of bias which have been identified as issues of concern in education (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986). Stereotyping refers to the assigning of overgeneralized attributes or roles to members of cultural groups. Invisibility refers to the omission of members of various groups. Imbalance can be either the over-representation of members of one cultural group in comparison to other groups or the presentation of one cultural viewpoint in unequal share. Linguistic form refers to either the use of stereotyped language to represent the speech of a cultural group or to the overuse of masculine pronouns or terms such as "mankind" in place of more gender-neutral terms such as "humanity". Unreality refers to an untrue or distorted representation of contemporary life. Fragmentation is the separation of information about cultural groups or their members with a resulting lack of clarity. These biases appear in a variety of educational materials including texts and storybooks.

The purpose of this study was to investigate elementary readers and storybooks for the appearance of

these biases across the cultural groups of age, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and urban/rural background. Race, social class and gender have received wide attention in education, but the inter-relationships among these groups have generally been overlooked (Sleeter, 1986). The issue of bias against age, religious groups or urban/rural background has largely been ignored in reference to education.

Method

Initially, over 200 books were examined. For literary consistency, all readers and textbooks were deferred for analysis, leaving 167 storybooks in this sample. These were easily accessible in school or public libraries, or in a curriculum resource center. Volumes with publication dates covering a forty year span were included on the rationale that if they remained on open shelves, then their "cultural messages" were still being transmitted to young readers. We analyzed these stories for frequency of the six types of cultural bias in reference to the six cultural groups. For example, if police officers were referred to as "policemen", this was interpreted as linguistic bias by gender. Similarly, if members of one group appeared less often than those of another group, this was viewed as imbalance. The inter-rater

reliability coefficient between two independent judges yielded a value of .79.

Results

A total of 727 cases of bias were identified with clear differences among both bias categories and cultural groups.

Bias Categories

In rank order, percentages of frequencies across bias categories were stereotyping, 39% (N = 281); invisibility, 29% (N = 208); imbalance, 14% (N = 99); linguistic form, 9% (N = 69); unreality, 8% (N = 62); fragmentation, 1% (N = 8).

Cultural Groups

In rank order, percentages of frequencies across cultural groups were gender, 32% (N = 241); race/ethnicity, 24% (N = 181); socioeconomic status, 18% (N = 130); age, 14% (N = 101); religious affiliation, 6% (N = 45); environmental background, 4% (N = 29).

Bias Category by Cultural Group

Patterns of differences appeared in the types of bias applied across cultural groups. The frequencies of bias categories by these groups appears in Table 1. A review of these frequencies makes clearer the interactions between the three main bias categories of

stereotyping, invisibility, and linguistic form and the different groups.

Insert Table 1 about here.

Stereotyping of gender appeared most often, followed by stereotyping of age, socioeconomic level and race/ethnicity in that order. Invisibility of racial or ethnic groups ranked first followed by gender. Imbalance, or unequal representation, occurred most often for gender, followed by race/ethnicity. Linguistic bias was used most often in reference to gender, followed by race/ethnicity. These several relationships have important implications for education and need to be examined more closely.

Descriptive Results

Stereotyping by gender.

The issue of stereotyping in reference to gender has received widespread attention. In this study, the issue appeared most often in regard to behavior and to social roles. In both story line and illustrations, females of all ages were depicted as passive or in actions which were assisting males or subservient to them. A recurrent theme was that of serving meals or

washing clothes. This latter activity was evident across different ethnic and racial groups including Asians, Blacks, and Caucasian family scenes. When women were portrayed as professionals, they usually appeared as teachers. Professors, however, were shown as middle aged Caucasian males.

Boys appeared as astronauts, weight lifters, or campers. They were shown as mischievous, while girls were portrayed as docile. In one story a little girl is punished for the same actions as those of her male cousin, but his behavior is considered acceptable. In another story, a little girl disguises herself to play on a baseball team. When she hits the winning run, the event is described as somehow being a lucky accident. She winds up as the team manager in charge of equipment including the water bucket! In two books dealing with the father's role as economic provider for the family, one tells a story about two children going downtown to visit their father's office while their mother remains at home, and the other story describes a wife and children greeting the father when he returns home from work. These stories could also be interpreted as containing socioeconomic middle class bias, since the mother stays home while the father goes to work. Although these two books were published over twenty

years ago, they continue to teach a lesson in gender stereotyping to young readers. More recent publications are not necessarily free from these biases. A 1985 illustration shows a grandfather and grandson riding in the front seat of a car, with the grandmother and granddaughter riding in the back seat.

This gender bias also appeared in books which were ostensibly about subjects other than family relationships or social roles. For example, the pictures in a book about transportation showed all vehicles being operated by males, except for one woman driving a car and one little girl riding a scooter. The pictures in a series about natural science, technology and inventions showed males in active roles such as machine operators, loggers and parachutists and females in passive roles as observers of stars or street scenes. Only one picture in the series of 6 books showed a woman in a professional role, - that of a doctor. Stereotyping of gender also appeared in books about animals in human situations. Taken in conjunction with the linguistic biases which favored males, these storybooks appeared to teach the lesson that males are the professional and powerful members of society.

Males did not escape stereotyping. A story about

a dancing class portrayed little boys as being more interested in playing tricks than they were in dancing. (Has the author never heard of Fred Astaire?) Fathers were pictured as reading the newspaper, doing yard work or disciplining children. They were also portrayed as being unable to take care of babies and young children. Most of the books about single parent families referred to the mother and her children. The only exception was Families (Tax, 1981) which portrayed some children of divorce living with their mother and others living with their father. A more serious stereotype appeared in a recent book which attempts to teach a lesson about being wary of strangers, but all of the strangers were males. This implies that only male and not female strangers may pose a potential threat to children.

A few volumes did not present social roles as being gender-stereotyped. Girls Can Be Anything (Klein, 1973) offered to females a wide variety of career possibilities, including that of President of the United States. In a series entitled Anna the Doctor, Jill the Farmer, Jack the Carpenter, and Tom the Grocer (Butterworth, 1986) females were shown performing such roles as physician, pilot, newspaper delivery person ("paper girl"), store owner and baker,

in equal status with males.

This turnabout also appeared in some stories about males. Oliver Button Is A Sissy (Paoloa, 1979) tells of a little boy who prefers reading, drawing, and dancing to playing ball. When he wins a talent contest, his friends become more impressed. The story thus conveys a lesson that it is acceptable for males to be interested in the arts, which are stereotypically viewed as being "sissy". In Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt (Ernst, 1983) women laugh at a boy who wants to join a quilting club, so he forms a club for males. Eventually both the men's and women's quilts are joined for a prize-winning design. The story's lesson is that both genders co-operating together may bring about success. Daddy's Little Helper (Endersby, 1986) is a pre-reader consisting entirely of pictures showing a father and his young son doing a wide variety of household chores. Although no female is shown, (raising the possible question of invisibility), the theme of the book seemed clear - that household chores are not limited to one gender. In Piggybook (Browne, 1986) a mother repairs a car and the father and two sons work at other chores. Similarly, in Martha's House (Kunhardt, 1982) a mother is shown working in a basement workshop, while the father and sons do some

housework upstairs. Taken together, these several books were unusual in their effort to work against stereotyping activities for either gender.

Stereotyping by age.

The issue of stereotyping by age has received little attention in reference to children's storybooks. This bias, however, was second among cases of stereotyping. Elderly women were stereotyped not only in social roles but also by physical appearance. Many were depicted as either short and fat or tall and skinny with their hair in a bun. Old women were often portrayed as fussy or cranky.

A more troubling image portrayed elderly women as either being or resembling witches. Images of the witch or "wicked" step mother are common in fairy tales. The literary device in reference to these characters is not always understood. In fairy tales witches (and wicked stepparents) serve as the psychological twin to the fairy god mother. Together they represent the potential of benevolence and evil in all parents. In the modern stories, the fairy godmother is not always present to balance the psychological message of the tale.

Older males did not escape age stereotyping in these storybooks. Grandfathers were shown in social

roles similar to those of younger males. Ageism also appeared in the presentation of older people as targets for practical jokes or pranks, on the basis that it is easy to fool them. An exception to this portrayal appeared in The Purple Coat (Hest, 1986). In this tale a grandfather, who is also a tailor, cleverly solves the problem of having a coat of two different colors by making a reversible coat.

Stereotyping by socioeconomic level.

Stereotyping by socioeconomic level tended to be biased in favor of a middle class life style, with the omission of representation across other economic levels. Families were portrayed as living in well-kept single family homes, with yards and gardens, on suburban streets. A few stories dealt with the life style of the very rich, who were portrayed living in mansions and attended by servants. In contrast, city apartments often appeared shabby. Farms looked like rural variations of middle class homes. Stereotyping also appeared in regard to clothes. Farmers usually were shown wearing overalls and straw hats. Even an anthropomorphized country mouse fit this rural stereotype, while his city cousin was better dressed. Only one book about farming did not portray the farmer as being Caucasian. This volume, however, showed rural

Black grandparents as being economically less comfortable than their children. This combination of age and socioeconomic stereotype appeared in other books, where the elderly were presented as poorer than younger people. This may be a social fact for some elderly, but the stories did not appear to be teaching a lesson in trying to improve the living conditions of our economically less fortunate older citizens.

An alternative view of socioeconomic status appears in the Pippi Longstocking series (Lindgren, 1959). Pippi lives an unconventional life style and rejects the values of materialism.

Stereotyping by race/ethnicity.

Stereotyping by race or ethnic group was another theme. Asian Americans were often portrayed as owners of restaurants or laundries. One story told of a Caucasian boy with a speech impediment, but he is described as speaking Chinese. The "Chinese", however, referred to the lack of clarity in his speech. Illustrations of Blacks showed shabby homes and worn clothing. Native Americans were sometimes shown in full traditional garb, even in modern settings. Jews were portrayed living in city apartments or affluent suburbs and patronizing country clubs. In one story, a German count was referred to as a "dumb foreigner."

A few stories did attempt to reduce racial or ethnic stereotyping and to promote inter-group understanding. Of these, some were less bias-free than others. For example, Iggie's House (Blume, 1970) attempts to promote interracial understanding, but a racial stereotype appeared in the children's expectation that Blacks would excel at athletics. Among the more successful efforts were We're Taking An Airplane Trip (Moche, 1981) with both a Black and a Caucasian pilot, (and a female flight engineer), Black is Brown is Tan (Adoff & McCully, 1973) about an inter-racial family, and What Can She Be, A Newscaster (Goldreich & Goldreich, 1973) which offered a choice of career roles for both women and Blacks.

Invisibility by gender and race/ethnicity.

Various cultural groups were often not included or were under-represented in these stories. Ironically, when the stories were about members of one group, other groups were often under-represented.

Invisibility may be an issue in pictures when it is not an issue in the story. Illustrations about occupations frequently showed only Caucasian males and excluded both females and members of other racial or ethnic groups. The educational message is that these men are most eligible for or can best perform the

duties associated with these social roles.

Linguistic bias by gender and race/ethnicity.

Because linguistic bias by gender has received widespread attention, it is not necessary to provide extensive examples here. In spite of attempts in our society to change terms such as "chairman" to "chairperson" or "fireman" to "fire fighter", a linguistic bias by gender was a recurrent theme in these storybooks.

A subtle form of bias appeared in names. In stories about people from a variety of racial or ethnic groups, their names were usually of English origin. Sometimes the names were linguistic jokes based on English-sounding puns such as "Ah Mee" for Asian characters (Perkins, 1971).

Discussion

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is the most easily recognized form of cultural bias. Ease of recognition, however, does not explain its prevalence in this study. There is a subtle message imbedded in this bias - the message that members of some cultural groups are better able to perform the roles and responsibilities of the society. It also implies that members of other groups should conform to these traditions. Therefore stereotyping

conveys to young readers the value of society's status quo and does not encourage them to strive for their own highest individual achievement. In a democracy, this may be a high price to pay in regard to the nation's future.

Linguistic Bias

Although linguistic bias by gender appeared most often, linguistic bias by race/ethnicity was evident in some stories. Derogatory nicknames were used in reference to members of minority groups. Some stories even attempted to teach the lesson of ethnic tolerance through the use of linguistic slurs. Research on language development among children, however, suggests that more subtle uses of language, such as analogy, metaphor and irony, are generally not understood by elementary age students. A younger reader may misinterpret this ironic use of linguistic derogation.

Another form of linguistic bias appeared in the use of perfect standard English by characters from a wide variety of backgrounds. A writer confronts a difficult task in portraying the language of different groups while at the same time avoiding ethnic stereotyping. In their efforts to write well, authors may need to consider more carefully how to express the language of various cultural groups.

Invisibility

The most subtle form of bias is invisibility. It could be argued that this bias is more serious than stereotyping, for if certain groups are not represented at all, they are not even brought into consciousness in the minds of young readers. Invisibility may be evident in either the story itself or in the illustrations.

Invisibility is perhaps the most difficult bias to identify. The absence of a cultural group does not necessarily indicate invisibility. Not all stories are about all groups and if a plot focuses on a particular cultural experience, invisibility does not apply. Invisibility is the conspicuous absence of a cultural group when others are represented. An interpretation of invisibility is valid only when the reader perceives a lack of representation within the plot structure or pictures. For example, one scene of a school classroom showed eighteen young children but seventeen were Caucasians, one was Black, and there were no Asians. Thus Blacks were under-represented but the bias of invisibility applied to Asians. The issue of tokenism is relevant here. When members of different groups are under-represented, the reader sometimes receives the impression that this represents an attempt by the

author or artist to deter a charge of invisibility. In fact, under-representation is the bias.

Imbalance, Unreality and Fragmentation

Imbalance, unreality and fragmentation were more prevalent in the readers and texts than in the storybooks. These texts were not included in the final data analyses. In textbooks these three biases teach their own educational lessons. In addition to distortions of social reality, the contributions of different groups to the society are minimized.

Conclusion

When the results of this study are considered as a whole, the educational lesson is that members of different cultural groups have limited opportunities and that they are not viewed as being equally valued by the society. In order to teach a more constructive lesson for a democracy, all forms of bias should be taken into account when teachers select reading materials for their students' enjoyment.

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Table 1

Frequency of Bias Categories by Cultural Groups

Bias Category	Cultural Group					
	Age	Gender	Race/ ethnicity	Religion	SES	Urban/ rural
Fragmentation	1	1	3	1	2	-
Imbalance	15	28	26	2	23	5
Invisibility	18	38	79	31	36	6
Language	4	45	15	-	4	1
Stereotyping	53	117	41	9	49	12
Unreality	10	12	17	2	16	5

Note. n = 727